

Effects of adding an arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi inoculum and of distance to donor sites on plant species recolonization following topsoil removal

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Questions: Does addition of an arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi (AMF) inoculum increase the short-term restoration success of a nutrient-poor grassland (NPG) after topsoil removal? Does distance to intact remnant grassland (IRG) patches affect the restoration success, and does the effect of inoculum addition depend on the distance to IRGs?

Location: Meerdaal forest, Oud-Heverlee, Belgium.

Methods: In a topsoil-removed site of 8.5ha, where 24 IRG patches (c. 10% of the area) were kept, 48 plots (1m²) were established at three distances (5, 10 and 20m) from the edge of IRG patches. Half of the plots at each distance class were inoculated with a custom-made AMF-inoculum, whereas the remaining were used as controls. We recorded the plant species abundance in the plots, just before the addition of the AMF-inoculum, and one year after. We used repeated measures ANOVAs to test for effects of inoculum addition, distance to the IRG patches, and their interaction, on plant species richness, diversity, and on the plant community similarity between IRG patches and plots. We also

evaluated the response of AMF-dependent plant species, specialist plant species of NPG, and plant species with specific seed dispersal adaptations.

Results: Adding the inoculum positively affected the species richness and/or diversity of all plant species, AMF-dependent plant species and specialist plant species. It increased plant community similarity to the IRG patches. Increasing distance from the IRG patches had a negative effect on the richness and/or diversity of all plant species and specialist plant species. The positive effect of inoculum addition on richness and/or diversity of all plant species, AMF-dependent plant species and specialist plant species decreased with increasing distance from the IRG patches to the plots, likely indicating priority effects.

Conclusions: The application of a custom-made AMF-inoculum increased the short-term restoration success of NPG after topsoil removal. Dispersal limitation of specialist plant species of NPG, however, likely negatively affected the effect of inoculum addition. Apart from the AMF-effect, the reported strongly positive short-time effect of the inoculation was likely due to the high density of IRG patches at the site, and to the presence of organic-matter and other micro-organisms in the inoculum.

Keywords: AMF inoculum; dispersal limitation; dispersal syndromes; ecological restoration; nutrient-poor grasslands; priority effects.

Nomenclature: van der Meijden (2005).

Introduction

Owing to a widespread decline of species-rich semi-natural grasslands in Europe (Poschlod & Wallis De Vries 2002), ecological restoration of these habitats has been a priority since the 1970ies (Bakker 1989; Walker et al. 2004). These activities have also been strongly supported by the European Habitat directive (92/43/EEC), which aims at protecting and conserving habitats and wild fauna and flora. By restoring degraded ecosystems to their previous state, both species

diversity and ecosystem functioning can recover as well (Brudvig 2011). Whether or not successful restoration is achieved, largely depends on a range of biotic and abiotic constraints (Walker et al. 2004; Cramer et al. 2008), especially regarding soil properties and the capacity of target plant species to recolonize. In this respect, it has been shown that high soil nutrient levels constrain the successful restoration of nutrient-poor ecosystems (Fagan et al. 2008, 2010), whereas dispersal limitation (Standish et al. 2007; Öster et al. 2009) and the absence of soil biota (Kardol et al. 2006; Vergeer et al. 2006) may limit the arrival and establishment of seedlings of the target species (Öster et al. 2009).

Soil nutrient enrichment is largely caused by anthropogenic activities such as fertilization and atmospheric deposition from combustion processes (Peñuelas et al. 2012), and has been shown to strongly affect the occurrence and community composition of plant species. For instance, several studies have reported lowered species richness and shifts to dominance of a few competitive species in grasslands under increased nitrogen (N) input (Bobbink et al. 2010) and under phosphorus (P) enrichment (Ceulemans et al. 2013, 2014). In order to reduce nutrient levels at ecological restoration sites, high intensity interventions such as topsoil removal are often the only solution, especially for removing the immobile soil-P (Weijtmans et al. 2009; Pedley et al. 2013). However, Geissen et al. (2013) has recommended against using topsoil removal as a nature management technique due to its negative effects on soil quality and soil biota. It has indeed been reported that after topsoil removal only a small subset of the target plant species was able to recolonize the restoration sites (Verhagen 2007; Bekker 2008), even when target plant species were occurring in adjacent communities (Dobson et al. 1997; De Graaf et al. 1998; Bakker & Berendse 1999; Vergeer et al. 2006). Failure of target plant species to establish, despite low seed dispersal constraints may result from a lack of soil biota such as arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi (AMF) (van der Heijden 2004; Verhagen 2007), which are generally removed with the topsoil (Vergeer et al. 2006).

Arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi form a symbiosis with >80% of the land plant species (Smith & Read 2008). The symbiosis is based on a reciprocal exchange

93 of resources: the host plant provides photosynthates to the fungus, and in return
94 it receives vital inorganic nutrients (Smith & Read 2008). AMF may also
95 contribute to seedling establishment by integrating the seedlings into an existing
96 mycorrhizal network connected with already established adult individuals (Simard
97 & Durall 2004; van der Heijden & Horton 2009). Furthermore, the symbiosis
98 induces metabolic changes in the hosts through impact on defense hormone
99 production (Pozo & Azcón-Aguilar 2007; Jung et al. 2012). As a consequence,
100 plant resistance against soil pathogens (Whipps 2004), nematodes (De la Peña
101 et al. 2006), and abiotic stress, such as drought, salinity and heavy metals
102 (Miransari 2010; Smith et al. 2010) is increased.

103 Clearly, AMF are vital to plant communities. Yet once absent,
104 spontaneous re-colonization of AMF occurs very slowly (Allen and Allen 1992),
105 as dispersal happens through colonization of roots from plant to plant (Read et
106 al. 1976) and through transport of spores by wind (Egan et al. 2014), small
107 mammals (Fracchia et al. 2011), water (Walker 1988), or soil fauna (Klironomos
108 & Moutiglis 1999). The natural restoration of the entire fungal community may
109 take decades (Baar et al. 2008). Vergeer et al. (2006) reported that two and a
110 half years after topsoil removal, the abundance of AMF spores corresponded to
111 55-70% of the AMF spore numbers found in natural grasslands. Addition of AMF
112 inoculum may therefore be crucial to accelerate the development of target plant
113 communities at restoration sites that have been topsoil stripped.

114 In addition to local biotic and abiotic conditions, plant assembly also
115 strongly depends on the landscape context of the restoration site. Evidence
116 shows differential effects of distance to seed sources on plant species
117 recolonization, including strong effects (Bischoff et al. 2009; Pottier et al. 2009),
118 and weak or non-existing effects (Cole et al. 2010; Matthews & Endress 2010).
119 Furthermore, Helsen et al. (2013) found that spatial isolation filters plant species
120 based on their dispersal capacity, slowing down the community assembly
121 process towards the target community. Priority effects occur when earlier arriving
122 species affect the establishment, growth or reproduction of later arriving species
123 (Harper 1961; Chase 2003). These effects can lead to long-lasting differences in

species composition between the target community and the restored community. Therefore, the spatial context of the restoration site should be incorporated into the restoration design (Matthews et al. 2009).

The aim of this study was to test the effectiveness of the application of a custom-made AMF inoculum in increasing the short-term restoration success of nutrient-poor grasslands where the topsoil had been removed. We hypothesized that the addition of AMF inoculum would enhance establishment success of AMF-dependent plant species. Additionally, we aimed at testing how the spatial context of the restoration site, in relation to intact remnant grassland (IRG) communities that can act as a plant species source, affect the restoration success. We tested the hypothesis that the establishment success of specialist plant species of nutrient-poor grasslands, and of plant species with poor seed dispersal capacities, would decrease with distance from the IRG. Finally, we evaluated whether the effect of the addition of the AMF inoculum depended on the distance to the IRG patches. Here, we hypothesized that colonization by AMF-dependent plant species will decrease with increasing distance from the IRG patches, because well-dispersed plant species will monopolize distant restoration sites, thus negatively affecting the effectiveness of the AMF inoculum in distant plots.

Methods

Site description

The study was carried out in a large clearing in Meerdaal forest in central Belgium, south of Leuven (50° 48' 32.15" N, 4° 40' 34.42" E, 78 m a.s.l.). The study site was a former military domain (c. 8.5 ha) with ammunition storage facilities. In the context of the European habitat directive (92/43/EEC), a nature conservation project was carried out to restore nutrient-poor grasslands and grassy heathlands. After the removal of the remaining military buildings and roads, the topsoil was removed in January 2011, to a depth of 10 cm, to remove the nutrient-rich topsoil layer, down to the mineral soil. At the restoration site, 24 scattered patches of well-developed grassland communities were present around

the former ammunition storage locations. These IRG patches (sized between 0.03 and 0.04 ha, in total c. 10% of the area) occur in a regular grid pattern, and contain the original species-rich vegetation with characteristic and regionally endangered species of nutrient-poor grasslands such as *Polygala serpyllifolia*, *Thymus pulegioides* and *Campanula rotundifolia*.

Experimental design

In mid-August 2012, a total of 48 permanent plots of 1 m x 1 m were randomly established at three distances (16 replicates at each distance of 5, 10 and 20 m) from the edge to the closest IRG patch. Eight out of the 16 plots at each distance class were inoculated with a custom-made AMF inoculum (see further), whereas the remaining eight plots were not inoculated and served as controls (Fig. 1). To apply the inoculum, we removed the upper 1 cm layer of soil with a hand rake without affecting the sparse already established plants in the plot. We applied 900 ml of the custom-made liquid AMF inoculum per plot. After the application of the inoculum, we covered the plots with the removed soil. The plots that did not receive the inoculum addition were submitted to the same soil disturbance with the hand rake and de-mineralized water was applied.

Preparation and ex situ testing of the AMF inoculum

AMF-colonized roots can be used as a source of AMF inoculum (Tommerup 1984; Klironomos & Hart 2002). Because the origin of the AMF may strongly influence their effectiveness (White et al. 2008; Pellegrino et al. 2011), we used the roots of AMF-dependent plant species collected in October 2011 in the wide surroundings of the study area. These plant species are indicator species of nutrient-poor grasslands that are still relatively common, and included *Achillea millefolium*, *Centaurea jacea*, *Danthonia decumbens*, *Hieracium pilosella*, *Hypochaeris radicata*, *Potentilla erecta*, *Stachys officinalis*, and *Succisa pratensis*. Roots were soaked and washed out of soil with tap water, but still some soil remained attached. Afterwards, roots were blended separately per species in de-mineralized water with a commercial Philips HR7625 food

processor to chop them in small pieces, between 0.1 and 3 cm. The resulting muddy mixture of each species was equally distributed across 24 containers of 300 ml.

A greenhouse experiment was then ran to test the effectiveness of this custom-made inoculum through assessments of AMF root colonization and spore density, and to test if it contained pathogens and seeds that may confound the spontaneous colonization process. The experiment ran during four months. Three known AMF-dependent plant species (*Campanula rotundifolia*, *Nardus stricta*, and *Festuca filiformis*) were seeded as monocultures in 2 L pots, each pot containing 15 seeds. We used a substrate composed by potting soil and sand (3:1, respectively), both were autoclaved at 120 °C for one hour. The plant species were sown on sterilized substrate (control) and on sterilized substrate inoculated with the inoculum. Each treatment was replicated eight times, resulting in a total of 48 pots. We applied 300 ml of the AMF inoculum to the pots and de-mineralized water to the control pots. Root colonization and spore density were surveyed to test the effectiveness of the inoculum. After four months, roots were washed and stained following Grace & Stribley (1991), with 1:1 1% Methyl blue solution and 85% Lactic acid. Root samples were observed under a dissecting microscope at 32x magnification. The grid line intersect method (Giovannetti & Mosse 1980) was used to measure the degree of AMF colonization. In addition, 100 g of soil per pot was collected to extract the AMF spores, following the sucrose centrifugation method of Brundrett et al. (1994). Spores were counted using a dissecting microscope at 32x magnification. We found that the roots of all individuals that were inoculated were colonized by AMF. The mean percentage of colonization was 57.4% for *C. rotundifolia*, 50.4% for *N. stricta* and 25.1% for *F. filiformis*. In the inoculated pots, we counted between 49-207 spores g⁻¹ soil; none of the plants developed any type of disease. There were no AMF spores, and there was no AMF root colonization in the non-inoculated control pots. In addition, only two pots out of the 24 inoculated pots had non-sown *Juncus effusus* growing, which demonstrates a very low probability of seed introduction with the inoculum. In July 2012, the same

procedure was then followed to prepare the AMF inoculum to be used at the study site.

Vegetation surveys

In early August 2012, just before adding the AMF inoculum, we recorded the plant species abundance in the established 1 m x 1 m plots. A grid, consisting of 100 10 cm x 10 cm squares was placed on top of the plots and we counted the number of individuals of plant species that occurred in each square. The same procedure was repeated in July 2013. Additionally, we recorded all plant species occurring in each of the 24 IGR patches (Table S1. Supplementary material). In both surveys, 18% of the individuals were identified at family or genus level due to their early growth stage.

Data analyses

For both vegetation surveys and for each plot, we calculated both plant species richness and the Shannon diversity index to the power of e (Jost 2006) for all plant species, for AMF-dependent plant species (following Fitter & Peat (1994)), and for specialist plant species of nutrient-poor grasslands (following Declerck 2007; see Table S1, Supplementary material). In addition, we calculated the plant community similarity between the IGR patches and the experimental plots, using the Jaccard similarity index. Non-metric multidimensional scaling (NMDS) was used to analyze the similarity in plant community composition among plots. The NMDS analysis was based on the plant species abundance x plot matrix of the two surveyed years together, and on Bray-Curtis dissimilarities, with several starting points and a maximum of 1000 iterations. These analyses were done separately for (i) all plant species, (ii) AMF-dependent plant species, and (iii) specialist plant species. Furthermore, we determined the plant species richness according to plant dispersal syndromes. We distinguished between endozoochores, myrmecochores and anemochores (Kleyer et al. 2008; hereafter referred to as plant species dispersed by dung, ants and wind, respectively). The plant species were assigned to the prevailing dispersal syndrome. The nine most

widely distributed plant species in the plots were assigned to the category of well-dispersed plant species. Plant species richness, Jaccard similarity index, and NMDS were calculated using the R program 3.0.2 (R Foundation for Statistical Computing, Vienna, AT), with the package *Vegan* (Oksanen et al. 2011).

Prior to further analyses, F-tests were performed on the vegetation data of the initial survey (2012) to confirm that there were no *a priori* differences between plots at different distances from the IRG patches. To meet assumptions of normality, several response variables were log or square root-transformed.

We then conducted repeated measures ANOVAs to test for effects of inoculum addition (inoculated vs. non-inoculated), distance to the closest IRG patch (5, 10 or 20 m), and their interaction, on the differences in plant species richness, Shannon diversity, and Jaccard index between the surveys in 2012 and 2013. ANOVAs were run using the R package *nmle* (Pinheiro et al. 2009). Backwards model selection was used. When a significant effect was found, multiple comparisons were performed with the R package *phia* (De Rosario-Martinez 2012). Repeated measures ANOVAs were done separately for all plant species, AMF-dependent plant species, and specialist plant species. Similar analyses were done using species richness of the three plant dispersal syndrome categories and the well-dispersed plant species, as the dependent variables.

Finally, the NMDS scores (on the first two axes) of the plots in 2012 and 2013 were used as measures of plant community similarity among plots. These values were used as dependent variables in a repeated measures ANOVA, as described above. Again, these analyses were done using the NMDS scores of all plant species, AMF-dependent plant species, and specialist plant species.

Results

In total, we recorded 80 plant species in the IRG patches and 78 plant species in the plots, belonging to 28 families; 52 of them were AMF-dependent plant species, and 11 were nutrient-poor grasslands specialist plant species (Table S1). In 2012, we recorded 55 plant species; 37 were AMF-dependent plant species, and 9 were specialist plant species. In 2013, we registered 66 plant

species; 43 were AMF-dependent plant species, and 11 were specialist plant species. Of the nine well-dispersed plant species, five were AMF-dependent (*Holcus lanatus*, *Hypericum perforatum*, *Juncus effusus*, *Molinia caerulea*, *Rubus fruticosus*), and four were not (*Calluna vulgaris*, *Carex pilulifera*, *Luzula multiflora*, *Pinus sylvestris*). In 2012, the number of plant species recorded per plot ranged from 1 to 28 (mean = 12, SD = 6.4), and in 2013 it ranged from 4 to 32 (mean = 15, SD=7). Prior to inoculation, no significant differences were found among the three distance classes for plant species richness ($F_{2,45} = 2.6$, $P > 0.05$), Shannon diversity ($F_{2,45} = 2.96$, $P > 0.05$), Jaccard index ($F_{2,45} = 5.2$, $P > 0.05$), NMDS1 ($F_{2,45} = 4.2$, $P > 0.05$), and NMDS2 ($F_{2,45} = 4.5$, $P > 0.05$).

Plant species response to treatments

Inoculation significantly increased total plant species richness, the Jaccard species similarity index between the plots and IRG patches, and the plant community similarities among inoculated plots (Table 1, 2). The effect of the distance treatment on Shannon diversity was significantly higher in plots at 5 m than in plots at 20 m (Table 1, 2). The effect of inoculum addition on plant species richness, Jaccard similarity index, and plant community similarities among plots varied with distance to the IRG patch (Table 1). These variables were significantly higher in inoculated plots at 5 and 10 m than in inoculated plots at 20 m, whereas no significant differences were found between inoculated plots at 5 and 10 m (Fig. 2A, B, C). No significant differences were found among the three distances in the non-inoculated plots for these response variables. Plant species richness, Jaccard index between plots and IRG patches, and plant community similarities among plots were significantly higher in inoculated plots at 5 and 10 m, as compared to non-inoculated plots at the same distances. However, there was no difference among inoculated and non-inoculated plots at 20 m.

For the AMF-dependent plant species, inoculation significantly increased richness, Shannon diversity and Jaccard species similarity with IRG patches (Table 1, 2). The effect of the distance treatment was significant for community

similarities among all plots (Table 1). These similarities were higher in plots at 5 and 10 m than in plots at 20 m (Table 2). The effect of inoculum addition on plant species richness, Shannon diversity, and the Jaccard index varied with distance to the IRG patch (Table 1). Richness was higher in inoculated plots at 5 m than in inoculated plots at 20 m (Fig. 3A), whereas no significant differences were found among inoculated plots at 10 and 20 m, and among 5 and 10 m. Richness in non-inoculated plots did not differ significantly among the distance classes. Shannon diversity and the Jaccard index was significantly lower in inoculated plots at 20 m, as compared to plots at 5 and 10 m, whereas no significant differences were found between inoculated plots at 5 and 10 m (Table 2, Fig. 3B, C). These response variables in non-inoculated plots did not significantly vary with distance. Richness, Shannon diversity and the Jaccard similarity index with IRG patches were significantly higher in inoculated plots at 5 and 10 m, as compared to non-inoculated plots at same distances. However, inoculated and non-inoculated plots at 20 m did not significantly differ.

For the specialist plant species of nutrient-poor grasslands, the inoculum addition significantly increased the Shannon diversity and Jaccard similarity index (Table 1, 2). The effect of the distance treatment on specialist plant species richness and community similarities of specialist plant species among all plots was significant (Table 1), both variables had higher values in plots at 5 and 10 m than in plots at 20 m (Table 2). The effects of the inoculum addition on the Jaccard index varied with distance from the IRG patches (Table 1). The Jaccard index was significantly higher in inoculated plots at 5 or 10 m than in plots at 20 m (Fig. 4), while no significant difference was found between plots at 5 and 10 m. The Jaccard index between non-inoculated plots and IRG patches was not significantly different among the different distance classes. The Jaccard index was significantly higher in inoculated plots at 5 and 10 m, as compared to non-inoculated plots at same distances. However, these similarities were not significantly different in inoculated vs. non-inoculated plots at 20 m.

The inoculum addition significantly increased the richness of plant species dispersed by wind, ants or dung (Table 1, 2). The effect of inoculum addition

significantly varied with the distance treatment (Table 1); plant species richness of the three groups was significantly higher in inoculated plots at 5 and 10 m than in inoculated plots at 20 m (Fig. 5A, B, C). In non-inoculated plots the plant species richness did not vary significantly among the different distance classes. Plant species richness of these three groups was significantly higher in inoculated plots at 5 and 10 m, as compared to non-inoculated plots at same distances. However, plant species richness in inoculated vs. non-inoculated plots at 20 m was not significantly different.

Finally, the effects of inoculum addition, distance and their interaction on NMDS2 scores were not significant for any of the studied groups of plant species (results not shown). Similarly, there were no effects of the two treatments and their interaction on the abundance of the well-dispersed plant species (results not shown).

Discussion

Effects of AMF-inoculum addition

The aim of this study was to test whether the application of an AMF inoculum could improve the short-term restoration success of a nutrient-poor grassland where the topsoil was removed. We predicted that the addition of the inoculum would enhance the establishment success of AMF-dependent plant species. Our results demonstrated that one year after topsoil removal, the plots that were inoculated showed a higher Shannon diversity and richness of AMF-dependent plant species, at least in the plots closest to the IRG patches that could act as plant species sources. Zhang et al. (2012) found similar results, one year after inoculating degraded grasslands in China with a lab propagated AMF inoculum.

The type of inoculum that we used is less expensive than commercial inoculum, and it is less time consuming to produce than inoculum that is produced by isolation of AMF spores and further propagation in plant roots. In addition, it is likely unfeasible to generate a pure inoculum consisting of many different and naturally occurring AMF taxa, because many of these are impossible or very difficult to cultivate and propagate. Although we have no

information on the specific AMF taxa that were present in the inoculum, we can assume that they were very similar to the ones naturally occurring in nutrient-poor grasslands in the study region. AMF species composition is indeed known to affect plant diversity and community composition, especially when a majority of the plants in the community are AMF-dependent (Vogelsang et al. 2006). In addition, White et al. (2008) and Pellegrino et al. (2011) experimentally demonstrated that the origin of the inoculated AMF taxa has an important effect on plant performance. These authors reported that inoculum produced through propagation of AMF species from the local ecosystem was more effective in improving plant performance than a commercially available AMF inoculum. The use of native AMF from roots of plant species from undisturbed grasslands may therefore be a convenient alternative to a commercial AMF inoculum, and may offer important ecological and economic advantages.

It is important to note that our results cannot be exclusively attributed to AMF in the inoculum, but also to the presence of organic matter and other soil micro-organisms. Soil amendments have been proven to be beneficial in ecological restoration (de Deyn et al. 2003; Carbajo et al. 2011), and to play a facilitating role in establishing the soil microbial-plant association. Organic matter amendments have also been suggested to stimulate and improve plant mycorrhization (Douds et al. 2006, Jaisson et al. 2011). In degraded alpine areas in Switzerland, Schmid et al. (2008) found that through applying an (commercial) AMF inoculum only, 65% of the area recovered with vegetation, in comparison to 87% when commercial AMF inoculum was applied along with organic nutrients and P-solubilizing *Penicillium* spp. Nevertheless, the strong root colonization and high density of AMF spores in our greenhouse experiment support the role of AMF on our results. It was also the explicit objective of this study to evaluate a practical and feasible ecological restoration approach, through adding a custom-made inoculum. It is currently indeed not possible to generate a 'pure' AMF inoculum consisting of many different, naturally occurring AMF species only, because many of these are impossible or very difficult to cultivate and propagate.

Such a pure inoculum would never mimic the AMF composition of our custom-made inoculum.

Effects of distance to the donor sites

We also tested how the distance to IRG that can act as a plant species sources affected the restoration success. We predicted that the establishment success of nutrient-poor grassland specialist plant species would decrease with distance from the IRG. Our results show that increasing distance from IRG patches had a negative effect on specialist plant species richness. Such step-wise dispersal is consistent with the findings that many grassland specialists are poor dispersers (Martin & Wisley 2006; Cousins & Lindborg 2008; Helsen et al. 2013). We did, however, not find a distance effect on the Jaccard similarity index between specialist plant species in the IRG patches and the study plots. This might be due to the relatively low number of specialist plant species in the area (12 species in total, range in the plots between 0 and 6 species). We also found no effects of distance on the total plant species richness. Similarly, Krauss et al. (2004) found no effects of distance on generalist plant species richness colonization in calcareous grasslands in Germany. In contrast, Öster et al. (2009) reported a decline of generalist plant species richness with increasing distance from species-rich semi-natural grasslands to former arable fields, and Diacon-Bolli et al. (2013) found that the amount of captured diaspores decreased abruptly at 20 m, in a seed rain study in a calcareous grassland. Also the Jaccard similarity index between the IRG patches and the plots did not change with distance in our study, suggesting that generalist plant species disperse and establish well across the studied distances.

We also predicted that establishment success of ant-dispersed plant species, but not of wind- and dung-dispersed plant species, would decrease with distance from the IRG patches. We found that distance between the IRG patches and the study plots had no effect on the richness of plant species dispersed by wind, ant or dung. These results are consistent with the findings of Öster et al. (2009), who reported that wind- and animal-dispersed seeds were able to

successfully disperse up to 10 m from grasslands into former arable fields. That we did not find a negative effect of distance on ant-dispersed plant species is likely due to the very limited occurrence of such species (range in the plots between 2 and 3 species) at our study site.

Effects of AMF inoculum addition depend on the distance to the donor site

Finally, we evaluated whether the effect of the addition of AMF inoculum on plant community composition depended on the distance of the plots to the IRG. We hypothesized that AMF-dependent plant species colonization would decrease with increasing distance from the IRG patches because well-dispersed plant species would monopolize the distant plots, obscuring the effectiveness of the inoculation. We indeed found that in the inoculated plots, the richness of AMF-dependent plant species and the Jaccard similarity index between the IRG patches and plots was relatively constant up to a distance of 10 m, whereas it decreased at 20 m. On the other hand, in the non-inoculated plots, no significant differences were found along the studied distance classes. This pattern of community similarities demonstrates that the positive effect of inoculum addition is reduced in distant plots. We also found that the abundance of well-dispersed plant species did not vary across the studied distances, additionally suggesting that the effectiveness of the inoculation at 20 m distances is obscured by dispersal limitation of AMF-dependent plant species, in combination with priority effects exerted by well-dispersed generalist plant species. Interestingly, the latter was composed by AMF-dependent and non AMF-dependent plant species, then the priority effects exerted over the other AMF-dependent plant species were independent to AMF-dependency. This suggests that well-dispersed generalist plant species created soil legacies, and these legacies contributed to strong priority effects on AMF-dependent plant species (Grman & Suding 2010).

Our findings suggest the high ecological significance of inoculation in early stages of restoration. Even though the positive effect of the addition of AMF inoculum decreases in distant areas due to dispersal limitation, the addition of AMF inoculum should be a desirable part of ecological restoration and can be

considered as a best practice in ecological restoration, likely along with seed addition. Further work should focus on elucidating AMF species composition of roots of plants from inoculated and non-inoculated plots, for example using amplicon-sequencing approaches (e.g. Van Geel et al. 2015), in order to disentangle the role of AMF addition and the addition of organic matter and other soil micro-organisms.

Acknowledgements

VT benefited from a DBOF fellowship from the KU Leuven Research Fund. We acknowledge financing from the KU Leuven Research Fund project PF/2010/07 and Belspo IAP project P7/04. We thank the Nature and Forest Agency (ANB) for permission to perform the experiments in Meerdaal. We thank Dr. Helios de Rosario-Martinez for his statistical help, Veronika Martinová for her help in the greenhouse experiment and Kasper van Acker and David Sanín for their fieldwork assistance.

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Table 1. Inoculation strongly positively affects plant species colonization of topsoil removed sites, but the effect of inoculation is generally highly dependent on the distance from the donor site. *t*-values from repeated measures ANOVAs evaluating the effects of inoculum addition, distance to remnant grassland patches, and their interaction on responses of different plant species sets. Significance: ***, $P < 0.001$; **, $P < 0.01$; *, $P < 0.05$.

Species set	Variables	Inoculum (Ino)	Distance (Dist)	Ino x Dist
All plant species	Species richness	2.7***		-3.3***
	Shannon diversity		-2.8**	
	Jaccard index	4.8***		-5.7***
	NMDS1	3.2**		-3.6***
AMF-dependent plant species	Species richness	2.5**		-2.8**
	Shannon diversity	2.3*		-2.8**
	Jaccard index	4.1***		-4.9***
	NMDS1		3.1**	
Specialist plant species	Species richness		-2.6**	
	Shannon diversity	2.2*		
	Jaccard index	3.4***		-3.5***
	NMDS1		-3.7***	
Richness of plant species dispersed by:	Wind	2.6**		-2.9**
	Ant	2.9**		-3.1**
	Dung	3.1**		-3.3***

Table 2. General increase of plant species richness and diversity following inoculation of topsoil removed sites, with the exception of sites at the furthest distances (20 m) from intact remnant grassland patches. Mean (\pm 1 SE) plant species richness, Shannon diversity and Jaccard index between plots and intact remnant grassland patches, in inoculated and non-inoculated plots, at three distances from the remnant patches. Data for 2012 (prior to inoculation, and 1 year after top soil removal), and for 2013 (one year after the inoculation).

		Inoculum addition				Distance (m)					
		Inoculated		Non-inoculated		5		10		20	
		2012	2013	2012	2013	2012	2013	2012	2013	2012	2013
All plant species	Species richness	10.9 \pm 1.4	16.2 \pm 2.1	11 \pm 1.6	12.5 \pm 1.3	11.2 \pm 1.6	15.3 \pm 2	11 \pm 1.5	15.2 \pm 1.9	10.5 \pm 1.4	12.5 \pm 1.2
	Shannon diversity	1.5 \pm 0.1	1.7 \pm 0.2	1.5 \pm 0.1	1.6 \pm 0.1	1.5 \pm 0.1	1.8 \pm 0.1	1.5 \pm 0.1	1.7 \pm 0.2	1.4 \pm 0.1	1.5 \pm 0.1
	Jaccard index	0.4 \pm 0.04	0.5 \pm 0.04	0.3 \pm 0.05	0.4 \pm 0.05	0.4 \pm 0.04	0.5 \pm 0.05	0.4 \pm 0.1	0.5 \pm 0.05	0.3 \pm 0.03	0.3 \pm 0.1
AMF-dependent plant species	Species richness	6.4 \pm 0.9	8.4 \pm 1.3	6.1 \pm 0.8	6.8 \pm 0.8	6.5 \pm 0.9	8.4 \pm 1	6.1 \pm 0.9	7.6 \pm 0.9	6.2 \pm 0.7	6.8 \pm 1
	Shannon diversity	1.2 \pm 0.1	1.4 \pm 0.1	1.2 \pm 0.1	1.2 \pm 0.1	1.2 \pm 0.1	1.4 \pm 0.1	1.2 \pm 0.1	1.4 \pm 0.1	1.1 \pm 0.1	1.1 \pm 0.1
	Jaccard index	0.3 \pm 0.03	0.4 \pm 0.05	0.3 \pm 0.04	0.3 \pm 0.03	0.3 \pm 0.03	0.4 \pm 0.05	0.3 \pm 0.03	0.4 \pm 0.05	0.3 \pm 0.03	0.3 \pm 0.02
Specialist plant species	Species richness	2.9 \pm 0.4	3.6 \pm 0.5	2.8 \pm 0.5	3 \pm 0.5	3.1 \pm 0.4	4 \pm 0.5	2.8 \pm 0.5	3.9 \pm 0.5	2.8 \pm 0.5	2.9 \pm 0.5
	Shannon diversity	0.5 \pm 0.1	0.7 \pm 0.1	0.5 \pm 0.1	0.6 \pm 0.1	0.5 \pm 0.1	0.8 \pm 0.1	0.5 \pm 0.1	0.8 \pm 0.1	0.4 \pm 0.1	0.6 \pm 0.1
	Jaccard index	0.4 \pm 0.1	0.6 \pm 0.1	0.4 \pm 0.1	0.4 \pm 0.1	0.4 \pm 0.1	0.6 \pm 0.1	0.4 \pm 0.1	0.6 \pm 0.07	0.4 \pm 0.05	0.5 \pm 0.1
Richness of plant species dispersed by:	Wind	5.3 \pm 0.5	7.2 \pm 0.4	5.3 \pm 0.6	5.8 \pm 0.5	5.3 \pm 0.6	6.9 \pm 0.5	5.2 \pm 0.5	6.7 \pm 0.5	5.3 \pm 0.5	5.7 \pm 0.4
	Ant	2.2 \pm 0.5	3.4 \pm 0.4	1.9 \pm 0.4	2.2 \pm 0.5	2.1 \pm 0.4	3.2 \pm 0.5	2.1 \pm 0.4	3 \pm 0.4	1.9 \pm 0.4	2.2 \pm 0.4
	Dung	3.5 \pm 0.4	4.8 \pm 0.3	3.4 \pm 0.4	3.9 \pm 0.5	3.3 \pm 0.3	4.7 \pm 0.4	3.6 \pm 0.3	4.6 \pm 0.3	3.5 \pm 0.4	3.9 \pm 0.3

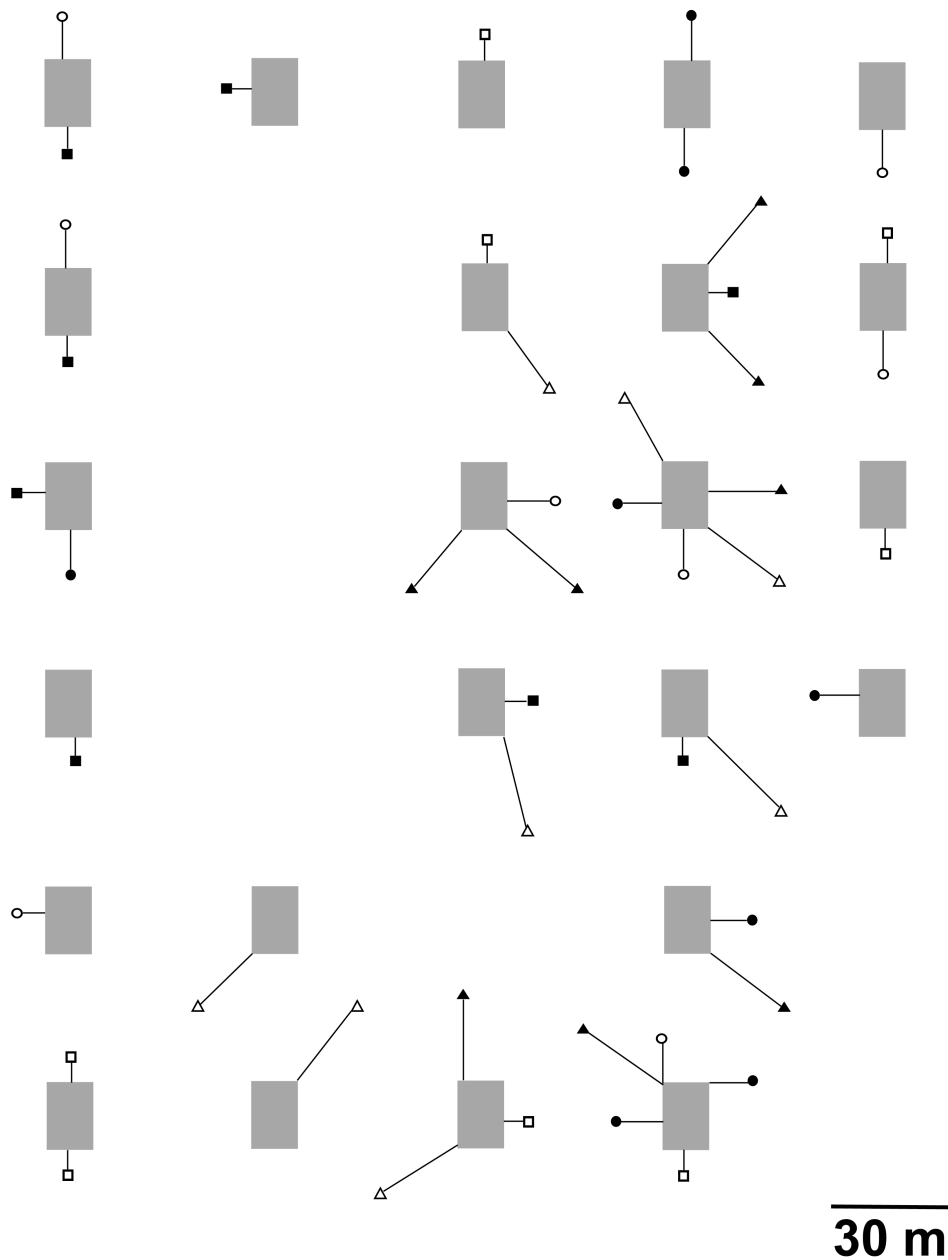


Figure 1. Spatial arrangement of the study plots relative to the intact grassland remnants (grey rectangles). Squares represent study plots at 5 m, circles at 10 m, and triangles at 20 m from the closest intact remnant grassland. Inoculated plots are represented by solid symbols and non-inoculated plots by open symbols.

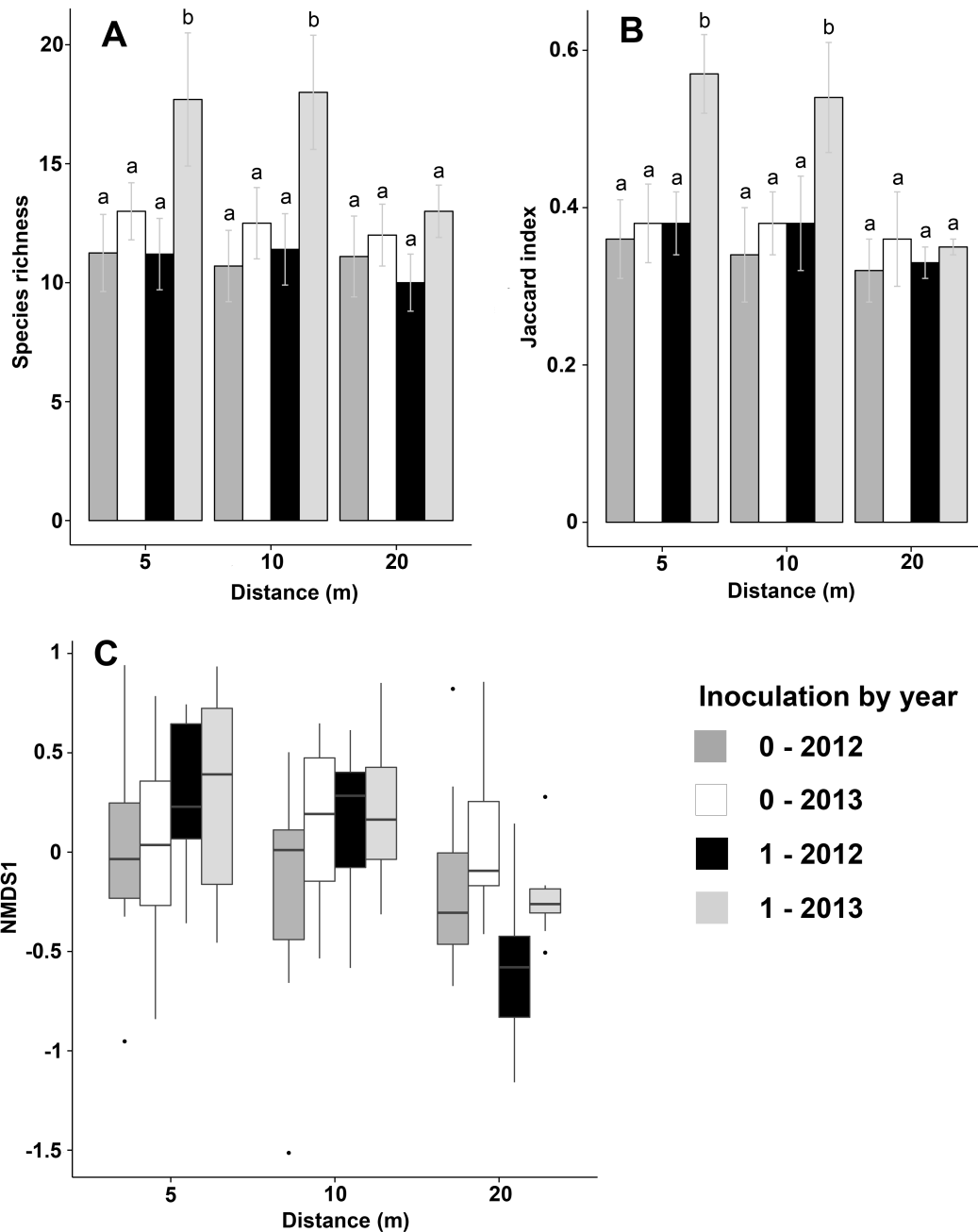


Figure 2. Inoculum addition generates strong effects on plant species richness (A), similarity with intact remnant grassland communities (B), and community composition (C) for all plant species, but not in the plots furthest (20 m) from the intact grassland remnants. Inoculated plots: 1; control plots: 0. Error bars represent ± 1 SE. Different lower case letters denote significant differences between years within treatments.

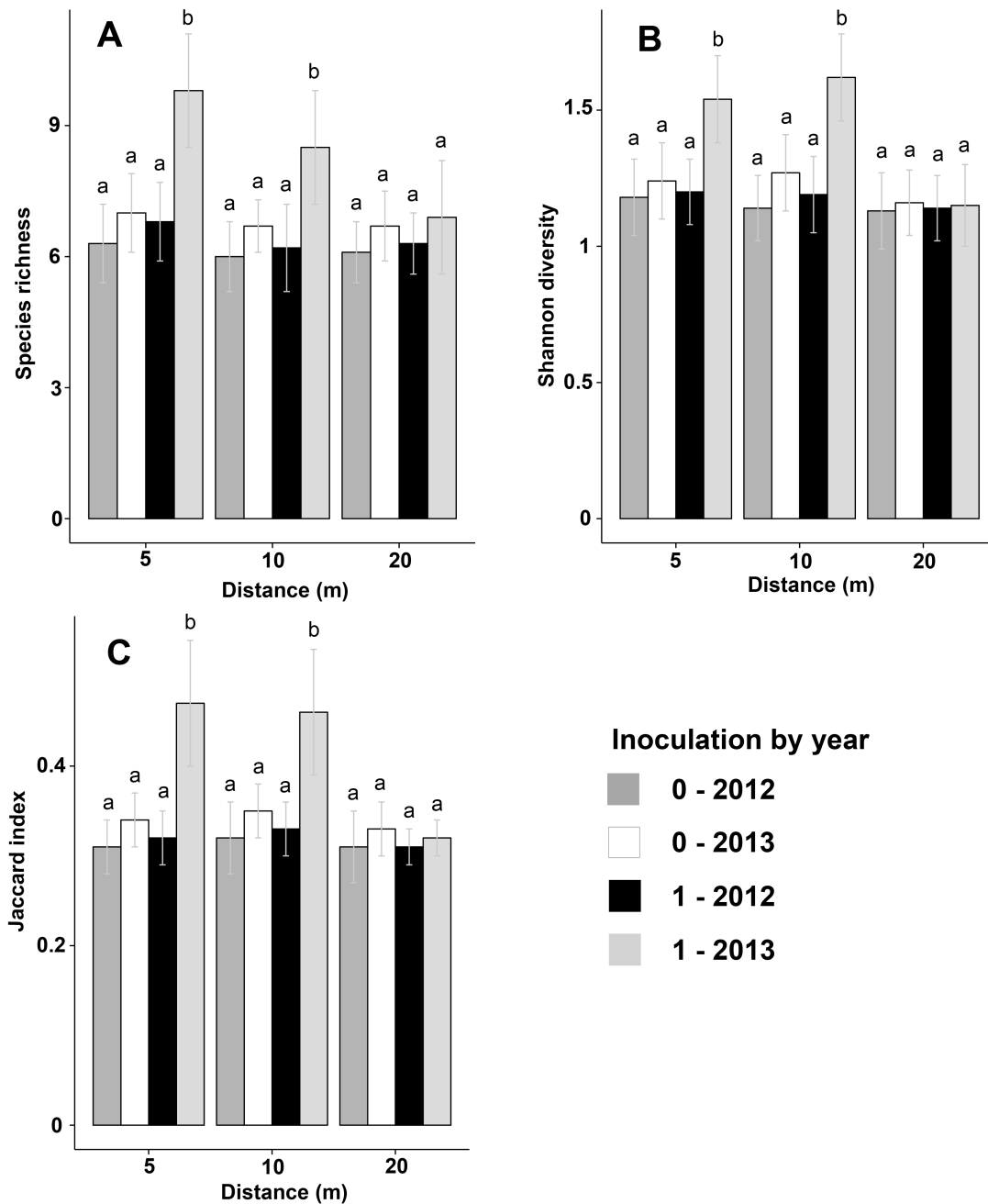


Figure 3. Inoculum addition generates strong positive effects on plant species richness (A), Shannon diversity (B) and similarity with intact remnant grasslands (C) for AMF-dependent plant species, but not in the plots furthest (20 m) from the intact grassland remnants. Inoculated plots: 1; control plots: 0. Error bars present ± 1 SE. Different lower case letters denote significant differences between years within treatments.

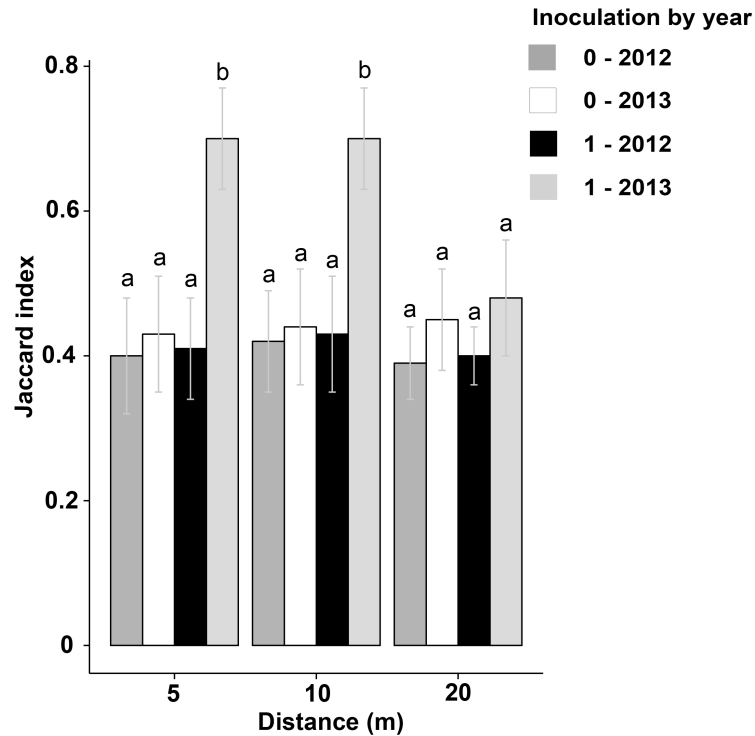


Figure 4. Strong effect of inoculum addition on the plant community similarity between plots and intact remnant grassland patches for specialist plant species of nutrient-poor grasslands, but not in the plots furthest (20 m) from the intact remnant grasslands. Inoculated plots: 1; control plots: 0. Error bars represent ± 1 SE. Different lower case letters denote significant differences between years within treatments.

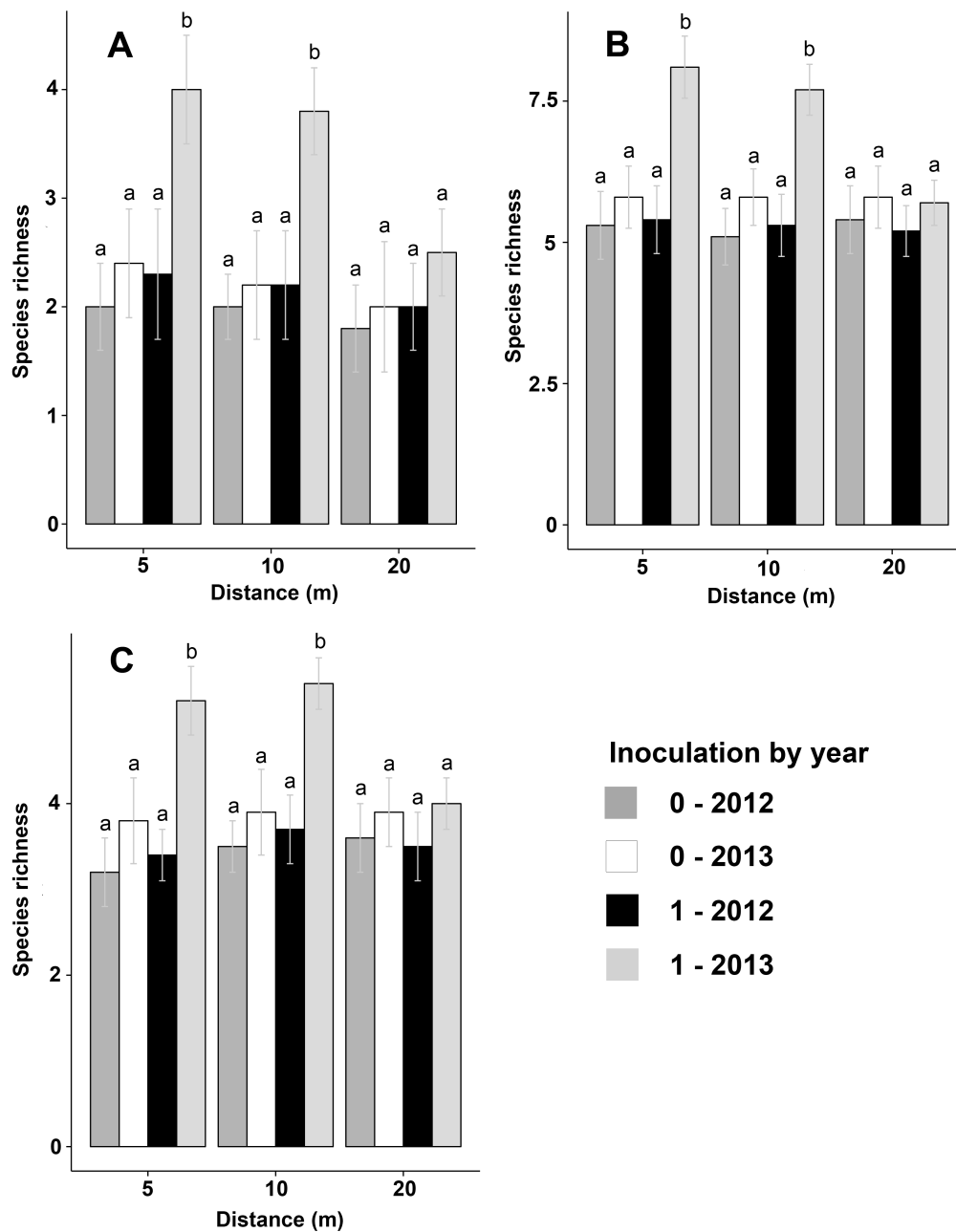


Figure 5. Strong effects of inoculum addition on the richness of plant species dispersed by ants (A), wind (B) and dung (C), at every distance class, except at 20 m from the intact remnant grassland patches. Inoculated plots: 1, and control plots: 0; Error bars represent ± 1 SE. Different lower case letters denote significant differences between years within treatments.

784 **Supplementary material**

785

786 **Table S1.** Plant species frequencies in intact remnant grassland patches and in the plots. AMF-dependent plant species,
787 specialist plant species of the nutrient-poor grassland and well-dispersed plant species are indicated, and main the seed
788 dispersal mode is provided.

Species	Intact remnant grasslands	5 m		10 m		20 m		AMF-dependent	Specialist	Dispersal type	Well-dispersed
		2012	2013	2012	2013	2012	2013				
<i>Achillea millefolium</i>	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	X		Wind	
<i>Agrostis canina</i>	2	0	0	1	0	1	0	X		Wind	
<i>Agrostis capillaris</i>	14	8	14	10	12	0	0	X	X	Wind	
<i>Aira caryophylla</i>	3	0	1	0	0	0	0	X		Wind	
<i>Anagallis arvensis</i>	7	2	6	2	4	1	2	X		Wind	
<i>Aphanes australis</i>	7	3	4	2	6	0	3	X			
<i>Arenaria serpyllifolia</i>	9	7	7	4	7	3	4			Wind	
<i>Artemisia vulgaris</i>	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	X		Wind	
<i>Betula pendula</i>	11	8	10	7	10	6	8			Wind	
<i>Buddleja davidii</i>	4	1	3	0	0	0	1			Wind	
<i>Calluna vulgaris</i>	15	8	11	7	11	11	13			Wind	X
<i>Campanula rotundifolia</i>	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	X	X	Wind	
<i>Cardamine hirsuta</i>	2	1	0	1	0	0	0	X		Dung	
<i>Carduus crispus</i>	2	0	0	1	0	0	0			Ant	
<i>Carex pilulifera</i>	15	8	11	8	13	12	13		X	Ant	X
<i>Centaurium erythraea</i>	7	2	6	1	1	1	3	X		Wind	
<i>Centunculus minimus</i>	2	2	0	0	0	0	0				
<i>Cerastium fontanum</i>	2	2	0	1	0	0	0	X		Dung	
<i>Cerastium glomeratum</i>	1	0	0	1	0	1	0			Dung	

<i>Cirsium arvense</i>	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	X		Wind	
<i>Conyza canadensis</i>	2	2	0	1	0	1	0	X		Wind	
<i>Crepis capillaris</i>	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	X		Wind	
<i>Cirsium</i> spp.	3	0	1	0	3	0	0	X			
<i>Cytisus scoparius</i>	11	6	7	5	10	2	6	X	X	Ant	
<i>Epilobium</i> spp.	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	X			
<i>Equisetum arvense</i>	3	2	2	2	2	1	1	X			
<i>Erodium cicutarium</i>	2	1	1	0	1	0	0	X		Wind	
<i>Fragaria vesca</i>	5	4	4	1	3	0	2	X		Dung	
<i>Gnaphalium uliginosum</i>	2	2	0	1	0	0	0	X		Wind	
<i>Holcus lanatus</i>	15	1	12	3	8	0	11	X		Wind	X
<i>Holcus mollis</i>	15	3	8	2	8	3	5	X		Wind	
<i>Hypericum humifusum</i>	3	3	0	3	2	1	2			Wind	
<i>Hypericum perforatum</i>	13	9	12	10	13	7	9	X		Ant	X
<i>Hypochaeris radicata</i>	4	1	4	1	4	0	1	X	X		
<i>Juncus bufonius</i>	5	0	5	2	4	3	4	X		Dung	
<i>Juncus effusus</i>	14	12	13	11	14	13	14	X		Dung	X
<i>Juncus tenuis</i>	10	6	10	4	7	3	6			Dung	
<i>Linaria vulgaris</i>	3	0	2	0	2	0	3	X		Wind	
<i>Lotus corniculatus</i>	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	X	X	Dung	
<i>Luzula multiflora</i>	15	13	11	14	15	8	13		X	Dung	X
<i>Medicago lupulina</i>	6	0	6	0	6	0	1	X		Dung	
<i>Molinia caerulea</i>	13	5	11	5	9	7	13	X		Wind	X
<i>Myosotis</i> spp.	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	X			
<i>Ornithopus</i> spp.	2	0	2	0	2	0	0		X		
<i>Pinus sylvestris</i>	15	15	16	14	16	11	16			Wind	X
<i>Plantago major</i>	5	4	3	1	1	1	1	X		Wind	

<i>Poa annua</i>	9	0	5	2	8	1	6	X		Wind	
<i>Polygala serpyllifolia</i>	7	0	0	0	0	0	0				
<i>Potentilla erecta</i>	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	X	X		
<i>Potentilla reptans</i>	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	X		Ant	
<i>Prunella vulgaris</i>	5	3	4	0	3	0	1	X		Ant	
<i>Pteridium aquilinum</i>	4	0	0	1	3	1	2	X			
<i>Quercus robur</i>	2	0	0	0	1	0	0			Dung	
<i>Ranunculus repens</i>	5	4	3	4	3	0	0	X		Wind	
<i>Rubus fruticosus</i> agg.	13	11	11	10	12	11	12	X		Dung	X
<i>Rumex acetosella</i>	6	0	2	0	5	0	3	X	X	Wind	
<i>Sagina procumbens</i>	11	5	9	5	8	2	3			Dung	
<i>Salix</i> spp.	10	8	8	2	5	2	3				
<i>Scrophularia nodosa</i>	4	3	1	1	2	0	1	X		Wind	
<i>Solidago virgaurea</i>	4	0	3	0	1	0	1	X		Ant	
<i>Spergula arvensis</i>	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	X		Dung	
<i>Spergularia rubra</i>	1	0	0	1	0	0	0			Dung	
<i>Stellaria</i> spp.	8	0	7	0	5	0	2	X			
<i>Taraxacum officinale</i> agg.	5	0	1	0	4	0	0	X			
<i>Teucrium scorodonia</i>	10	6	5	6	8	5	5	X		Dung	
<i>Thymus pulegioides</i>	10	0	0	0	0	0	0				
<i>Trifolium dubium</i>	5	1	1	1	1	0	0	X		Wind	
<i>Vaccinium myrtillus</i>	2	1	0	0	0	0	0			Dung	
<i>Vaccinium</i> spp.	2	0	1	0	1	0	0				
<i>Verbascum thapsus</i>	1	0	0	1	2	0	1	X		Wind	
<i>Veronica officinalis</i>	8	5	6	5	4	1	3	X	X	Ant	
<i>Veronica serpyllifolia</i>	9	3	4	5	7	0	1	X		Ant	
<i>Vicia hirsuta</i>	2	0	1	0	1	0	0	X		Dung	

Asteraceae sp 1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0				
Asteraceae sp 2	1	0	0	0	1	0	0				
Asteraceae sp 3	1	1	0	0	0	0	0				
Brassicaceae sp.	1	0	0	0	0	0	1				
Caryophyllaceae spp.	1	0	1	0	0	0	0				
Lamiaceae spp.	1	0	0	0	1	0	0				
Poaceae spp.	1	0	0	0	0	0	3				